

Heifer International - Chicago

NEWS / INFORMATION

For Poor Households in Rwanda, One Cow Makes A Difference

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By Jim Devries, Executive Vice-President of Programs for Heifer International based in Little Rock, Arkansas and Danielle Nierenberg, senior researcher at the Worldwatch Institute.

Recovery is a word you hear a lot in Rwanda. From public service announcements on television to billboards--it's the motto for a place that just 15 years ago was torn apart by genocide. More than one million people were murdered in 1994, as ethnic strife turned neighbor against neighbor in one of the bloodiest civil wars in African history.

"Heifer is helping a recovery process," explained Dr. Dennis Karamuzi, a veterinarian and the Programs Manager for Heifer International Rwanda. In 2000, Heifer started its projects in Rwanda in a community in the Gicumbi District, about an hour outside of the capital, Kigali. This community was especially hard hit by the genocide because it's close to the border with Uganda. Residents who weren't killed, fled to Kigali for safety.

In the years following the genocide, the Gicumbi District is making a comeback thanks, in part, to Heifer International. Heifer works with farmers all over the world, helping them develop sustainable agriculture practices, including providing livestock and training farmers how to raise them.

Heifer's start in Rwanda was a little rocky. At first, the community was suspicious of the group--because they were giving farmers "very expensive cows," says Holimdintwoli Cyprien, one of the farmers trained by Heifer to raise dairy cows. They didn't understand how the group could just give them away. Many community members thought that it was a plot by the government to have them raise livestock and then take them away, a remnant of the ethnic rivalry between the Hutus and Tutsis that started the conflict there in the 1990s.

But Heifer introduced a South African dairy breed, known for its high milk production, because, according to Dr. Karamuzi, "no stock of good [dairy cow] genes" was left in the country after the genocide. And he says that these animals help prove "that even poor farmers can take care of high producing cows."

And these animals don't only provide milk—which can be an important source of protein for the hungry—and income to families. They also provide manure, which is a source of fertilizer for crops and is now helping provide biogas for cooking to households raising cows in the country as

part of a the National Biogas Program.

Madame Helen Bahikwe, another farmer in the Gicumbi District, began working with Heifer International in 2002. She now has five cows—and an excess of manure. With a subsidy from the government, Madame Helen built a biogas collection tank, which allows her to use the methane from decomposing manure to cook for her 10-person family. She no longer has to collect or buy firewood, saving both time and money and protecting the environment. The fuel is also cleaner burning, eliminating the smoke that comes from other sources of fuel.

Heifer is also helping farmers become teachers, and training other Heifer partners. Holindintwali Cyprien hasn't always been a farmer. After the genocide, he and his wife, Donatilla, were school teachers, making about \$USD 50.00 monthly. Living in a small house constructed of mud, without electricity or running water they were saving to buy a cow to help increase their income. But when Heifer International started working in Rwanda almost a decade ago, Cyprien and Donatilla were chosen as one of the first 93 farmers in the country to be Heifer partner families. Along with the gift of a cow, the family also received training and support from Heifer project coordinators.

Today, they've used their gift to not only increase their monthly income—they now make anywhere from \$USD 300-600 per month—but also improved the family's living conditions and nutrition. In addition to growing elephant grass and other fodder—one of Heifer's requirements for receiving animals—for the 5 cows they currently own, Cyprien and Donatilla are also growing vegetables and keeping chickens. They've built a brick house and have electricity and are earning income by renting their other house.

Today, Cyprien is going back to his roots and making plans to teach again--this time to other farmers. He wants, he says, "the wider community to benefit from his experience." And Heifer's work is now being recognized—and supported--by the Rwandan government. In 2008 the government instituted the One Cow Per Poor Household Program, which aims to give the 257,000 of the poorest households in the country training and support to raise milk for home consumption.

But Heifer, says, Dr. Karamuzi, is also building an exit strategy by connecting farmers to cooperatives, which can organize and train farmers themselves.

